

## NOTE ON A RELIC OF THE PHALLUS CULT AMONG THE M'KAHTLA

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With 1 plate.

SCATTERED over the Elands River ward of the Pretoria district of the Transvaal are isolated communities of a native tribe known as the M'Kahtla or Vaal Kafirs. These on investigation prove to be Baralong, who at some date not definitely fixed migrated from the western Transvaal to their present habitat. In the well-known M'Kahtla village on the farm Rooifontein, No. 378, the writer recently came across an interesting relic of phallicism which it is the object of the present note to describe.

Travelling through the village the eye is at once arrested by two groups of tall poles, the one standing isolated from the huts and kraals in a field near the centre of the village, the other in an enclosure within a palisade.

The poles of the first group have evidently been standing for some considerable time as the wood of which they are composed is in an advanced state of decay. Of those within the palisade three look rather ancient. The fourth, shown in the accompanying photograph (Plate VI), which is covered with a decorative pattern in black, has evidently been erected quite recently.

Enquiries elicited the fact that the erection of the poles forms part of the circumcision rites of the tribe, the actual circumstances being as follows:

The so-called circumcision chief and the adult natives and initiated youths, who have attended the ceremony, on the night of their return from the circumcision lodge, slaughter a cow and, having eaten it, proceed to plant in the ground a previously cut pole, which they decorate in the manner shown with a black pigment prepared from powdered charcoal and the fat of the cow.

The next morning, immediately after sunrise, the whole of the adult male populace assemble and dance round the pole shouting, "O women come and see what the cow has brought forth in the night." This is a signal for the women and children to join in the ceremony, the men continuing to sing and chant songs—for the most part highly obscene—peculiar to the occasion.

All the boys who are circumcised at the time are said to belong to the same regiment, and each regiment has as its emblem its own pole, which is held in great veneration. In this respect the poles play much the same part in the initiation ceremony as the small conical stone erections or *Phiri*, which are put up alongside the circumcision lodges of the Bapedi of Sekukuniland<sup>1</sup>.

According to the testimony of educated natives the poles, which are called *Ramoleele* (literally "longer than anything else"), represent the male organ, and there can be no question, therefore, that we have to do with a survival of the Phallus cult; the whole ceremony being of the nature of what has been termed *sympathetic magic*. It is probably in some obscure pagan observance of this nature that the Maypole dance, which until a comparatively recent date figured so prominently in the May Day festivals of European peasants, had its origin.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Roberts, N. and Winter, C. A. T., *S. A. Journ. Sci.* 1915, pp. 574-575. \*

